Deadly Toxins Cached by CIA, Church Says

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Deadly poisons, including shellfish toxin potent enough to kill thousands of people, have been found in a secret cache maintained by the Central Intelligence Agency, Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) said yesterday.

He said the CIA kept both the shellfish toxin and a smaller amount of cobra venom "in direct contravention" of presidential orders more than five years ago that such materials be destroyed.

Complaining angrily of news leaks about the poisons, Church confirmed that his Senate intelligence committee would hold public hearings on them next week despite White House objections.

The poisons were reportedly developed for the CIA under the code name Project Naomi during the 1950s. Church said the discovery might be relevant to the committee's assassination inquiry. He said he has no reason to think any of the toxins were ever actually used, but the committee is investigating "one particular mission" that apparently never came to fruition.

In response to a news conference question, Church indicated he was familiar with—but refused to comment on—an allegation that some toxin was sent to Africa to kill Congolese Premier Patrice Lumumba in 1961. According to the allegation, the shipment did not arrive until after Lumumba had been assassinated by other means.

Church would say only that the committee was still investigating the question of projected use of some of the poison and that its findings would be made public "in due course."

The Idaho Democrat added that the retention of the poisons, after President Nixon ordered destruction of such stockpiles in 1969, raised grave questions about internal controls and supervision within the CIA.

Church said CIA Director William E. Colby was apparently unaware of the cache until earlier this year when he asked agency employees to notify him of anything that might be relevant to the outside investigations that were then getting under way.

Church and Committee Vice Chairman John G. Tower (R-Tex.) were quietly told of the stockpile several months ago. The CIA's deputy director of science and technology, Carl Duckett, then conducted an in-house investigation through one of his deputies, Sayre Stevens, and reported the findings to the full Senate committee last week.

Church said the committee is still trying to determine who in the CIA was responsible for blocking destruction of the posions and who knew about the decision. Former CIA Director Richard Helms, now ambassador to Iran, will be questioned on that score by the committee in executive session today.

"Somewhere within the CIA, a decision was made to disobey the presidential order," Church declared at a breakfast meeting with reporters that preceded his news conference. He said Colby's apparent ignorance of the cache even after becoming CIA director in 1973 suggested an alarming "looseness of command and control within the CIA . . . ."

Along with an inventory of other unspecified materials, the lethal poisons were discovered at a CIA laboratory facility and put under heavy guard, Church said. He said news reports that they were found at Ft. Detrick, Md., were incorrect, but he refused to say where they were discovered.

Church said he was singling out the shellfish toxin and the cobra venom because they were the only items in the cache whose retention "unquestionably contravenes" Nixon's executive order.

Nixon announced in November, 1969, that the nation would never engage in germ warfare and ordered the destruction of the U.S. stockpile of bacteriological weapons. A subsequent "clarification" of the order made it clear that the order was to apply to bacteriological toxins, Church said, adding that the CIA agrees that the poisons should have been disposed of.

He also sharply disputed a report in yesterday morning's editions of The Washington Post quoting unnamed sources as stating the poisons were retained on grounds that they might be useful for experimental purposes.

He said the shellfish toxin, for which there is no known antidote, had been kept by the CIA in such quantities "as could kill many thousands of people," far more than what might be needed for any laboratory experimentation.

Church could not say why the CIA had the poisons developed or why it kept them despite the Nixon decree, but he said he assumed they were meant for individual targets.

"I'm not prepared to charge today that the CIA ever intended to conduct mass bacteriological warfare against foreign nations," he said. "I would have to assume that the purpose was to be more specifically targeted."